

Dale P. Andrews and Robert London Smith Jr., eds. *Black Practical Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015. 350 pages. \$49.95.

More than a decade ago co-editor and homiletics scholar Dale P. Andrews argued that a chasm exists between Black theology and Black Church folk traditions, and that this estrangement is caused, in large part, by the inducement of American individualism on black churches, which undermines the communal spirit and genuine identity of black Christians. Andrews, evidently burdened by his early claim, not only demonstrates with the arrival of *Black Practical Theology* his unyielding commitment to tacking down further justification for his indictment, but in teaming up with U.K. pastor-research scholar Robert London Smith Jr., he makes good on an implied pledge in this fresh proposal.

Black Practical Theology comprehensively graphs the contours of black practical theology, offering readers eighteen essays that explore an exhaustive range of generative topics involving the most pressing exigencies within what Smith conceptually labels the “black thematic universe,” which shapes the religious life world of contemporary African Americans and Pan-Africans (8-9). Flowing from an integrative methodological map grounded in hearer-response criticism, Andrews and Smith enlist project contributors from three distinct communities: 1. black theology scholars who work within the constructive, biblical, and ethics disciplines; 2. practical theology scholars who work within its customary disciplines (homiletics, pastoral care, Christian education, and spirituality); and 3. pastoral and parachurch ministry leaders serving black congregations and communities.

Organized into six contributor sections: black youth, intergenerational relations, and ageism; education, class, and poverty; gender, sexual orientation, and race; globalism, immigration, and diasporan communities; health care, HIV/AIDS, and poverty; and, mass incarceration, capital punishment, and the justice system, authors enter into what the book’s editors term a “trialogical” exchange (13). Around these categorized issues authors become collaborative partners, with ministry leaders offering intramural affirmations or criticisms to their partners’ observations. The book’s unifier is each author’s investigative inquiry into grouped themes shaping black consciousness and modes of ecclesial practice. Even if alien to their customary writing rhythms, because black practical theology pays debts to interpretation and construction, each essayist was charged to offer practical suggestions for transforming inherited practices and oral and cultural traditions (6). For example, in section four, Catholic practical theology scholar Phillis Sheppard, a self-identified middle-aged, lovingly partnered black lesbian, mother of three clergywoman (100); womanist systematic theologian Diana L. Hayes; and Covenant Baptist (UCC) of Washington, DC co-pastors Dennis and Christine Wiley, address agency and actions of black church praxis through gender, sexual orientation, and race analysis. For Sheppard a black practical theology involves uncovering spiritually maiming practices that replicate cultural violence. She asks, “What in black religion legitimizes theological, social, personal, or interpersonal violence (98)?” For Hayes theological interpretation as a practical theology calls for a retrieval of themes of liberation (black theology) but also of survival and quality of life (womanist theology). With this end in mind “the process of reconnecting our theology to our praxis in ways that are healing and holy for all” is authentically jumpstarted (123). The Wiley’s

offer up the idea that Christians cannot say they are baptized into the "body of Christ" and "in fellowship" with God while at the same time be "out of fellowship" with other Christians. An accurate understanding of fellowship is critical because the Church cannot exist in the absence of fellowship. No issue has been more divisive within the human family, and within the Black Church, they note, than the issue of homosexuality (144). Though the seldom helpful terms "progressive" and "conservative" pepper their prose, their essay is rich in thoughtful critique and practical suggestions for helping black churches to think critically about ecclesial arrangements that frustrate *koinonia* and mute Black Christian voices on other social issues.

Madipoane Masenya's essay is a must read for preachers daring to announce the universal call of the Christian faith within multi-ethnic, generationally and educationally diverse settings. Accessing sermons that are preached in English only, she writes, may unwittingly work against the gospel's intent of drawing listeners into divine encounter (73-74). Willie James Jennings' Christologically-informed disruptive critique and suggested strategies for resisting "the emergence, growth, and expansion of a Eurocentric aesthetic regime that narrates . . . the beautiful, the intelligent, and noble around white bodies" is masterfully insightful (163). Jeremiah Wright's pastoral response to Anthony Reddie's call for "participative black theology" admonishes pastor-scholars to bridge theoretical Black theology and "praxiological" black theology by putting "black theology in a cup that ordinary folk can recognize" (85). Following Michael Battle's and Raphael Warnock's essays on spiritual and physical incarceration, fittingly, *Black Practical Theology* signals its symbolic "Amen" in homiletical fashion. In her sermon titled "A Savior for People with a Record," biblical scholar and prisoner reentry advocate Madeline McClenney defends one central idea: "the average black Christian could not see Christ in the average felon" (281).

In terms of length, research rigor, and writing quality, not all essays are created equal in this volume, which is invariably the case with most edited collections. And for a practical theologian empiricist wanting hard statistics to support authorial claims, this reader should know they are slight. Inevitably, the burden of any text bearing the label practical theology is to demonstrate concretely how might such a proposal help shape theology's future toward more fully embodying the normative purposes of the Christian faith. This is why such texts can never stop at observation-analysis or deconstruction. To be practically useful to Christian practitioners they must undertake the risky pragmatic task of daring to answer the question, "Now what?" Every once in a while a work comes along that causes me to say, "Would've been nice to have this as a grad student!" For scholars and pastors interested in a book that helpfully indexes and interprets the most critical issues impacting global Christianity in general and contemporary black churches and communities in particular today, this is that work.

Kenyatta R. Gilbert, Howard University School of Divinity, Washington, DC